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# The Contribution of the News Media to the Rise of a Populist Regime in Mexico

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## Abstract

This paper studies if the current mass news media still constitutes a major challenge for the process of democratisation of Mexico, or if they are working for the consolidation of an authoritarian regime in this country. Based on a literature review on the subject, different scholars acknowledge that there has been some progress in the liberalisation and democratisation of the Mexican news media, however, this progress has not been enough to consolidate a democratic public sphere in this country. Based on this conceptual framework, the purpose of this paper consists on assessing the extent to which the current Mexican news media supports the rise of a populist regime in Mexico, and on identifying the causal mechanism that has triggered the high popularity of AMLO, assuming that the Mexican news media has played an important role for this outcome.

## INTRODUCTION

The democratic character of the public sphere discourages the rise of any 'populist' regime. Indeed, the critical debate in the public sphere dispirits the frame of 'populist' discourses and policies that may be more hurtful than beneficial to people. Conversely, a fair degree of autonomy of the news media, from the government, contributes to the democratization of the public sphere, since the lack of autonomy of the news media undermines freedom in public debate.

Furthermore, to grow and consolidate, a 'populist' regime needs to undermine free competition and the critical perspective of news media, because these traits detonate the emergence of a democratic public sphere.

The present paper argues that the Mexican public sphere has not evolved as the legal electoral framework of Mexico has done so, and that public opinion in

Mexico is still shaped undemocratically. Furthermore, so many unfair and unequal practices remain in the Mexican public sphere that the complete transition of Mexico to democracy seems unrealistic.

Moreover, the political freedom of many Mexican people has been seriously compromised by the calamitous activities of organized crime, which has killed several candidates, at the subnational level, especially during the last federal electoral process of 2018.

If we add to these circumstances that the current Mexican electoral system encourage deep conflicts of interests in the political decision making process (Buscaglia, 2013), that the fairness of the electoral competition, at the national and sub national level, has been compromised by the limited access of opposition nominees to the mass media, and the serious restrictions to private funding of independent candidates, then it does not convey the impression that Mexico is on a 'secure' path of improving the quality of its democracy.

### The News Media During the Post-Revolutionary Era

Throughout the post-revolutionary era (1917 – 2000), the print and broadcast news media became an extraordinary obstacle for the complete transition of Mexico to democracy. Indeed, during this historic period, the news media in Mexico were mainly controlled by co-optation and, when necessary, by repression.

Regrettably, these strategies over the news media persists until date, despite of the extinction of the PRI regime and the triple alternation (PRI – PAN (2000), PAN –PRI (2012), PRI – MORENA (2018)) of political party at the national government.

Furthermore, throughout the 2012 – 2018 *sexenio*, the PRI intended to return to its golden age of tight control over the news media, mainly through patronage and clientelist networks, by which both, prominent, and rank and file journalists, benefited from the *chayotes* (bribery), as recompense for their favourable news coverage of President Enrique Peña Nieto's policies, discourse and decisions.

In other words, the Mexican public sphere continued being substantially shaped by the same mass media companies that had supported this regime during the post – revolutionary era (1917 – 2000).

**The News Media During the *Sexenio* of EPN**

All through the *sexenio* of Peña Nieto (2012 – 2018), high profile national journalists, such as *Carmen Aristegui, Pedro Ferriz De Con and Víctor Trujillo "Brozo",* were fired from their respective radio or television programmes (which enjoyed wide audience), due to their harsh criticism to Peña Nieto's policies, discourse and decisions. Furthermore, several low-profile journalists were also persecuted by the political establishment all through this *sexenio.*

On top of that, in this *sexenio* Mexico continued being one of the most dangerous countries, in the western hemisphere, for journalists, since they continued being silenced through violent repression (through death or at least serious assassination attempts), should they dare to reveal collusion deals between organized crime and politicians.

Despite of this favourable context for the PRI regime, and of its firm control of the editorial lines of print and broadcast news media, the popularity of a Mexican President had never been as low as in the last years of President Peña Nieto: Corruption scandals of several governors, public servants, functionaries, and even of the very same President, eroded severely in the public sphere the already feeble prestige of the PRI regime.[1]

Furthermore, the attempt of President Peña Nieto of controlling tightly the stream news media, distorted the Mexican public sphere, to such an extent, that critical voices of the regime could mainly be accessed through the social media (Twitter, Facebook, Instagram WhatsApp, etc…).

Nonetheless, these social media were limited, by subtle tactics, in their freedom and impact on public opinion. For example, by the employment of hackers

dedicated to simulating the existence of thousands of people supporting a specific point of view on public issues or on a presidential nominee. These circumstances undermined the quality of public debate, carried out through the social media, during the last federal electoral process of 2018 in Mexico.

## The News Media During the Federal Electoral Process of 2018 in Mexico

Despite of the patronage network of the PRI over the news media, suddenly, during the federal electoral process of 2018, the most important broadcast companies of Mexico (such as *TV Azteca and Televisa*), as well as different National Cable News Channels (such *El Financiero TV, Excélsior TV and Milenio TV*) and radio stations, started supporting the campaign activities and 'populist' discourse of Andrés Manuel López Obrador (AMLO).

Indeed, the owners and leaders of mass news media, apparently without understandable reasons, decided to support this presidential candidate and make use of their powerful tools to make him win these elections: a) Favourable editorial lines, b) extensive and positive coverage of both, campaign activities and discourse, c) the positive spin of news related with his corruption scandals and programmatic promises, and d) extensive space in news programmes to reply accusations of corruption; among other media strategies.

At the final stage of the federal electoral process of 2018 (April, May and June), it was astonishing to observe that this master plan, which had been recurrently used by the PRI regime, in the past, to promote their own presidential candidates and discourage the vote for opposition parties, was put in place to further the electoral triumph of AMLO.

### Research Goals of Paper

Based on these facts, the purpose of the present paper is to understand the main reasons behind the decision of mass media owners of supporting the presidential nomination of AMLO, as well as the implications of this decision, for the

future of the Mexican political regime, and for its protracted process of democratisation.

Moreover, this paper aims at understanding the extent to which the mass news media contributes to the rise of a 'populist' regime in Mexico. For this reason, this paper will assess the degree to which the mass news media adds to the positive interpretation, by Mexican people, of AMLO's 'populist' policies, decisions and discourse. This paper will also assess whether or not this interpretation is decisive in shaping the public sphere in Mexico, and whether it preserves effectively or not the popularity of AMLO.

All this knowledge may allow us to reasonably predict the probable political evolution of Mexico in the long term, should this state of affairs continue.

## RESEARCH METHODS

### Social Network Analysis

In order to learn the structure of AMLO's alliances with media owners and high-profile journalists, who support the positive interpretation and the broad diffusion, in the Mexican public sphere, of his discourse and policies, this paper will use Social Network Analysis (SNA), supported by documented evidence in journalistic reports.

This type of analysis is aimed at identifying the specific relational work between AMLO and key media actors: What is their specific exchange behind their social tie? What do key media actors gain by supporting AMLO? On the other hand, this kind of analysis is necessary to model a thorough causal mechanism, which may explain how and why AMLO's popularity remains so high among Mexican people.

### Interpretive Discourse Analysis

On the other hand, to comprehend in detail how AMLO is building popular support for his long term 'populist' regime in Mexico, the present paper proposes an Interpretive Discourse Analysis (IDA) of his official speeches, in order identify his

discursive tools and strategies aimed at enhancing his standing before Mexican people and at undermining the respective ones of his opponents.

For this purpose, this paper will follow an inductive approach to obtain, from official speeches, the emerging categories and themes that may subsequently enable us to ground a theory on his 'populist' strategy and style of government, supported by the stream news media of Mexico.[2]

This IDA is aimed at identifying the specific prominent part of AMLO's discourse that his supporters interpret positively, and at understanding more profoundly the process of its meaning making, by these people, that shape effectively their political attitudes, opinions and behaviour.

In other words, Interpretive Discourse Analysis (IDA) is aimed at recognizing the 'lenses' through which AMLO's sympathisers perceive the Mexican political reality (encouraged by stream news media), and at figuring out their process of interpretation of his discourse, which constitutes the basis of AMLO's popularity.

These research goals are based on the hypothesis that AMLO's theory about the state of affairs in Mexico 'makes sense' to his supporters, and that they are sincerely persuaded that he represents their best political option, since he is (apparently) focused on relieving their economic and social misfortunes.

**Interpretive Process Tracing**

Once carried out this IDA, the present paper proposes an Interpretive Process Tracing (IPT) to identify the specific 'interpretive' causal mechanism (in which the stream news media plays a crucial role), by which Mexican people overwhelmingly voted for him in the last elections of 2018, and support his popularity during his period of government.

Indeed, this paper argues that these specific causal mechanisms are based on the positive 'sense making' of AMLO's discourse and policies, by many Mexican

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[2] Some keywords that are expected to be found are 'mafia del poder', 'PRIAN', 'fifí', 'conservador', 'neo – liberal', 'corrupción', 'los de arriba', 'pueblo bueno y sabio', etc…

people, and it is precisely this kind of interpretation what constitutes a major obstacle, for his serious opponents, to effectively challenge him in electoral terms.

**Case Study and Content Analysis of News Coverage of the Federal Electoral Process of 2018.**

On the other hand, the present article will also research the news coverage of AMLO's campaign discourse and activities, by four main national newspapers, during the federal electoral process of 2018, in order to test its co relationship with the outcome of these elections.

For this research goal, this paper will practice content analysis of news related with the pre-campaign and campaign activities of the three main presidential nominees in 2018 (Andrés Manuel López Obrador, José Antonio Meade Kulibreña and Ricardo Anaya Cortés), in the following national newspapers: *El Universal, Milenio, Reforma and Excélsior.*

This content analysis will focus on three dimensions of news coverage:

*a)* The predominant editorial line on the respective presidential nominee, whether it was positive, negative or neutral.

b) The thematic focus of news coverage on the respective presidential nominee.

c) The attitude of the relative newspaper towards the public image of a presidential nominee.

The hypotheses to be tested through this analysis are the following:

$H_1$. The more positive editorial line on a presidential nominee, the better electoral result achieved, in the end, by the respective candidate.

$H_2$. The more focus of news coverage on policy proposals of the relative presidential nominee, the better electoral result achieved by the respective candidate.

$H_3$. The more exposition of corruption scandals of a presidential nominee, through news coverage, the worse outcome achieved by the respective candidate, at the end of the electoral process.

The strategy to test such hypotheses can be described in the following terms: The print news on each presidential nominee will be analysed to identify (1st) positive, neutral and negative editorial lines on the respective presidential nominee; (2nd) the prevailing thematic news coverage on the presidential nominees, and (3rd) the over exposition or concealment of corruption scandals of each presidential nominee.

In each of the two main phases of the electoral process of 2018 (the pre campaign and the campaign periods), that took place before the Election Day (July 1st, 2018), fifty notes of each newspaper will be qualitatively analysed. The editorial line of each newspaper, on each presidential nominee, will be identified (aversion, indifference or support for the respective presidential nominee) through evaluation coding.

On the other hand, the thematic focus of news coverage will be judged through descriptive and evaluation coding, to grasp thoroughly its impact in the outcome of the federal electoral elections of 2018; and finally, the attitude of a newspaper, towards the public image of a presidential nominee, will be appraised through its approach to the corruption scandals of the respective candidate: a) over exposition, b) concealment and c) objectivity.

The main research goal of this content analysis will be to identify meaningful patterns of news coverage on each presidential candidate so as to assess more accurately the impartiality/fairness of each newspaper, in their news coverage, on these presidential nominees. The patterns of news coverage that may be recognized in each newspaper, for each main presidential nominee in 2018, will be compared between each other, in order to classify them properly, according to a consistent typology developed through descriptive analysis.

However, this content analysis will not end in a typology of news coverage, rather, it will be aimed at the construction of a grounded theory on the impact of the Mexican news media in the electoral outcome of the presidential elections of 2018, based on pattern, axial and theoretic coding systems of news coverage, in order to identify the major categories, patterns and themes of this news coverage that impacted this electoral outcome.

On the other hand, the data condensation of news was done through integrating twenty five (25) notes, in each newspaper (*El Universal, Milenio, Excélsior and Proceso),* related with the pre campaign phase of each presidential nominee; and other twenty five notes (25), in each newspaper aforementioned, related with the campaign phase of each presidential nominee (which means fifty (50) notes, for each presidential nominee, in each newspaper chosen for this research).

Once news notes are qualitatively coded, a statistic analysis of the patterns identified will support an objective assessment of the editorial lines, thematic focus and attitude, of each newspaper, for each presidential nominee, which will be graphically represented.

In order to accomplish this research goal, the sampling of newspapers was purposive, since these publications arguably shape the public sphere and impact public opinion substantially in Mexico. Conversely, the sampling of notes, within each newspaper, was random, in order to be able to practice their content analysis more impartially.

**FINDINGS**

**Social Network Analysis**

López Obrador could only win the presidential elections of 2018 with the support of a powerful network of mass media owners, businessmen and high-profile journalists. Perhaps the most salient media owner who openly supported the presidential nomination of AMLO was *Ricardo Salinas Pliego,* CEO and Chairman of *TV Azteca.*

To start with, Salinas Pliego encouraged a broad news coverage of AMLO's 'populist' discourse and policy proposals, long before the beginning of the federal electoral process of 2018, in prime-time of *Tv Azteca's* most important television channel: Channel 13.

Conversely, Esteban Moctezuma Barragán, President of *Fundación Azteca,* and one of the closest partners of Salinas Pliego, worked also closely with AMLO during his presidential pre campaign and campaign, and was subsequently appointed National Secretary of Public Education.

Furthermore, the exchange of favours between AMLO and Salinas Pliego became openly evident in the public sphere, once AMLO took over the Mexican Presidency, since the nowadays Mexican President conceded *'Banco Azteca'* (owned by Salinas Pliego) the privilege of managing the delivery of some social programmes for vulnerable people, concession that has benefited enormously the profit interests of the owner of this private bank.

Nonetheless, AMLO also enjoyed the support of the owner, top executives and high-profile journalists of *Televisa*, still the main broadcast network of Mexico, although their tie was disguised, because the relationship of Azcárraga Jean with AMLO was not brought about straightforwardly, but through Azcárraga's father-in-law, Fastlicht Sacker.

However, the impact of this social tie could be noticed sensibly: *Televisa* covered AMLO's pre campaign and campaign activities of 2018 in positive terms, with no serious questioning of his 'populist' discourse and policy proposals; this strategy differed meaningfully from *Tv Azteca's* strategy of open support for AMLO, but in the end, it was as effective as this last one.

Furthermore, the owner of *Televisa* even lent the 'Aztec Stadium' to AMLO to close his national campaign activities, and offered him substantial human, economic and technological resources to achieve successfully this closing ceremony. This friendly relationship between *Televisa's nomenklatura* and AMLO became more evident when, once AMLO in power, his meeting with Jared Corey Kushner, son-in-law of US President Donald Trump, took place at the mansion of one of the top executives (Bernardo Gómez) of this private broadcast company, but whose full content was not revealed to the public.

Apart from the owners, top executives and news anchors of the two most important broadcast companies in Mexico, other media owners and high – profile news anchors of cable television channels of this country, such as *El Financiero and Milenio,* and of radio broadcast companies, such as *Radio Fórmula,* provided extensive positive editorial lines on AMLO, during the electoral pre campaign and campaign phases, and did not question him as hard as they had done to Ricardo Anaya, the most serious challenger of AMLO in the presidential elections of 2018.

On the other hand, other powerful businessmen, like Carlos Slim, also networked with AMLO and expected benefits from his electoral triumph, and there are even documented versions about the fact that some prominent international bankers, like George Soros, also networked with AMLO and supported his presidential nomination.

Beyond conspiracy theories, what is truth is that AMLO, not only did not challenge the international financial system, as one would naturally expect him to do as consequence of his discourse on the subject, but also assured this system that Mexico's public debt would be completely paid during his period of government, guaranteeing, in this way, its ordinary profits from the Mexican public budget.

Thus, how can we define the substantial content of the relationship within the powerful social network of AMLO? In theoretical terms, it might be defined as a patronage network structure, by which both, the interests of powerful businessmen, and the stability of AMLO's government, were mutually guaranteed.

This patronage network structure, integrated by media owners and powerful businessmen, should be taken into account in modelling the causal mechanism of the electoral triumph of AMLO in 2018, since this network supported the ample diffusion of AMLO's 'populist' discourse and policy proposals in the Mexican public sphere, during the pre-campaign and campaign phases of the federal electoral process of 2018.

Arguably, this social network intends to preserve the *status quo* in Mexico to assure the protection of their interests and power over the Mexican State, in other

words, it intends the custody of extractive institutions that may allow them to obtain enormous power over, and profits from, the Mexican State.

Not surprisingly, AMLO's media network did not contribute to a meaningful public debate in Mexico, during the electoral process of 2018, because it obstructed the critical insight on the 'populist' discourse and policy proposals of AMLO, which could have grievously endangered his real chances of winning the Mexican Presidency.

On the other hand, another strategic tactic that this network carried out to improve the chances of López Obrador of winning the presidential elections of 2018, was to discredit his main challenger, *Ricardo Anaya Cortés,* through extensive negative editorial lines on his presidential nomination and corruption scandals. Moreover, many paid activists counteracted negative opinions against AMLO, in social media, especially Twitter.

Despite of all these circumstances, it was the 'actualization' of a negative economic, social, political and moral context in Mexico, apart from the media and business network that supported AMLO, which contributed decisively to the positive popular interpretation of his 'populist' discourse and policy proposals.

**Interpretive Discourse Analysis of AMLO**

**Aims**

This analysis is based on five official speeches of AMLO delivered in special commemorative events, from March 11th, 2019 to May 1st, 2019.[3] Each of these speeches is meaningful for this research because they can reveal us in detail

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[3] These are the relative events of the official speeches analyzed: a) 'Meeting with Union Leaders in occasion of the feast of labor day' (May, 1st, 2019), b) 'Opening of the Analysis for Building the Felipe Angeles' Airport in Zumpango, Hidalgo' (April 29th, 2019), c) 'Public Security Strategy and opening of activities of the National Guard, in Minatitlán, Veracruz' (April 26th, 2019), d) 'Closing ceremony of the National Forum for the elaboration of the National Plan of Development' (March 17th, 2019), and e) 'Government report on the first 100 days of administration' (March 11th, 2019).

AMLO's operating ideology, his policy priorities, his perspective on the Mexican reality and his justification of his decisions and strategies of government.

This discourse analysis is aimed at finding patterns and axial themes of AMLO's discourse, as well as at developing a grounded theory on his discursive goals and on the central strategies he uses to attract people through his style of government.

**Coding Systems**

For this purpose, the five official speeches were analysed through the following qualitative coding systems: *Attribute, values, evaluation, emotion, descriptive and versus. Attribute coding* was aimed at understanding as best as possible the context of the speech, in order to comprehend better its particular framing. On the other hand, *values coding* was aimed at appreciating better AMLO's value system, which arguably impacts its policy priorities and decision-making strategies.

Conversely, *evaluation coding* was carried out in order to know more precisely how AMLO assesses the policies of previous administrations, in contrast with his own current policies, and to infer how these assessments might explain more accurately his political goals. In addition, *versus coding* was practiced to find confirming evidence of the dualistic structure of AMLO's populist discourse, which is arguably framed in this way in order to align as many people as possible to his own worldview perspective.

On the other hand, *emotion coding* was pursued to inform us about the *intensity* of the significance for AMLO of certain decisions, facts or events and public policies. Finally, *descriptive coding* was carried out to know more precisely which issues are tackled or constitute priority in his public agenda.

This paper will proceed to give results of AMLO's discourse analysis, speech by speech, so that, in the end, we might be able to build a grounded theory on his discursive goals and strategies, based on the patterns and axial themes that we uncover from each of these five official speeches.

### First Speech

To start with, the political and social context, of the first speech analysed, was very sensitive to workers' concerns, desires and frustrations (The feast Labour Day), thus not surprisingly, through values coding, we could realise that AMLO demonstrated appreciation of revolutionary ideals, especially the ideal concerned with the *welfare of the people*.

On the other hand, evaluation coding could reveal us the use of *revolutionary* indicators to measure the success of economic and social policies of former administrations, moreover, versus coding also revealed a theoretical framework of Mexican reality based on a revolutionary approach: The *status quo* vs the promoters of change (conservatives vs liberals, or the privileged vs the poor). Finally, emotion coding reveals us AMLO's gladness for having the right team to achieve his 'Fourth Transformation' of Mexico.

In the end, how could we interpret all these findings? Our interpretation is that the axial theme of this speech was the 'Fourth Transformation' of Mexico, from which we infer that its most meaningful theoretical code could be *welfare and peace*, since these values could perfectly become the ultimate goal of this 'Fourth Transformation'.


### Second Speech

The context of the second speech was within the presentation of a major project that would arguably benefit the whole country, and delivered after a bitter controversy about the loss of large amounts of money, due to the cancellation of the International Airport of Texcoco. AMLO experienced the impelling need of justifying his decision of cancelling this project and exchange it for a new one, in the public sphere.

Not surprisingly, he praised austerity and accused his opponents of not seeking the wealth of the people; he framed arguments to justify and legitimize his decision before the country, in order to win people's trust he pretended cultural identification with their concerns, desires and frustrations, and promised to vindicate their social, economic and political rights.

López Obrador labelled those who are opposed to people's development as 'conservatives', a clever strategy to disqualify them and neutralize their criticism against his decisions. Finally, his negative assessment of previous administrations is consistent with his discursive goals and need of justifying his decisions: To vindicate people's social, economic and political rights.

**Third Speech**

The attribute coding of the third speech reveals a very strategic event (the opening ceremony of one of the major changes AMLO intends to implement in Mexico). In this speech AMLO praises values that are consistent with his 'Fourth Transformation', identify former governments (The PRIAN) as enemies of the people and as colluded with organized crime (a smart way to obtain popular support).

AMLO compared and assessed the performance of previous and current social policies, based on revolutionary indicators, in order to justify legal reforms and policy change. He made strategic use of emotions to obtain political back up from key social actors.

The descriptive coding system reveals to us the priorities of his agenda, as well as his key strategies, through his social policy, in order to achieve his political goals.

**Fourth Speech**

The context of the fourth speech was 'The Closing Ceremony of the National Forum for the Elaboration of the National Plan of Development', which constituted a very strategic place for a public speech. This context constituted an excellent opportunity for AMLO for promoting his own policies and shaping public opinion in this sense.

In this speech, AMLO highlighted the principles and values of the Fourth Transformation: The vindication of people's social, economic and political rights. He contrasted his own goals with those of the economic model he labelled 'Neo liberalism' to sow division between former political leaders and the people.

AMLO seem to share more social democrat values than Marxist-anarchist ones, since he displays respect to liberal values and of traditional values of Mexico in foreign policy.

AMLO also displayed strategic use of emotions to obtain political support from people, described his main objectives and strategies to achieve the Fourth Transformation, revealing at the same time the content of his priorities. We can confidently argue that the transformation of economic, social and political policies was the pattern theme of his speech.

Furthermore, AMLO summarizes, in this speech, his strategy of government in order to achieve the Fourth Transformation. In this speech, we can identify the axial themes of his discourse and construct a grounded theory of his discursive strategy to obtain popular support for his government.

AMLO praises his own social policies in order to enhance the democratic legitimacy and popularity of his regime.

**Fifth Speech**

In this speech, AMLO shows himself confident in achieving the 'Fourth Transformation' and displays a strategic behaviour to obtain political support in this sense, on the other hand, AMLO discloses part of the goals, objectives, strategies, priorities and activities to achieve the 'Fourth Transformation' of Mexico. The theoretic code of AMLO's discourse could be 'Welfare and Peace', because it summarizes the content of the Fourth Transformation: The aim of the vindication of social, economic and political rights.

The axial theme is the 'Fourth Transformation' and the pattern themes are the goals, objectives, strategies, priorities and activities involve in this transformation. 'Welfare and Peace' seem to comprehend all the intermediary goals of economic, social and political policies of AMLO. The 'Fourth Transformation' is linked to the GOSPA necessary to achieve it.

In this speech, AMLO identifies once more the enemies of the people: The 'Mafia del Poder' (formed by the PRIAN, the international financial system and some

oligopolistic businessmen of Mexico), who have designed and implemented extractive institutions to exploit as much as possible Mexican people.

**Interpretive Process Tracing**

This paper argues that the causal process of the electoral triumph and high popularity of AMLO, among Mexican people, should be considered from a long-term perspective, since it evolved and developed through many years. The central feature of this causal process is that the social, political, cultural and political context of Mexico favoured the positive interpretation, by Mexican people, of AMLO's 'populist' discourse and policy proposals.

This context triggered that many Mexican people considered that AMLO's theory about the state of affairs in Mexico 'made sense'. This positive assessment encouraged 'cultural identification' with AMLO's discourse about Mexican political and economic reality (the understanding of an inner conflict between the people and the '*Mafia del Poder*'), and that many Mexican people became profoundly identified with the frustrations, goals, desires and wishes expressed by AMLO's speeches.

Thus, the process tracing, carried out in this research, to find out the specific causal mechanism of the popularity of President López Obrador, is interpretive, because it is based on the shared intersubjective self – understanding of many Mexican people, spread by AMLO's discourse, about the meaning of being involved in Mexican politics: To fight against the *'Mafia del Poder'*.

Nevertheless, it is important to consider that this 'cultural identification', with AMLO's 'populist' discourse and policy proposals, only took place as consequence of the worsening of public corruption and of the impoverishment of Mexican people, as well as consequence of the confirmatory actions of many politicians from the PRI and the PAN, regarding the *'Mafia del Poder'*, since their collusion in political decision making became openly evident in the Mexican public sphere.

On the other hand, this paper acknowledges that the causal mechanism of the high popularity of AMLO is complex, apart from being a structural mechanism, it

is also ideational and psychological: It derives from a positive interpretation of AMLO's discourse, by many Mexican people, and from their psychological need of hope, in the midst of a terrible social, economic and political crisis.

Moreover, several factors throughout time and space contributed to this outcome. This causal mechanism took place within a long period of time, it started at least eighteen years before the presidential elections of 2018, and was triggered by generation change and the subsequent cultural transformation of Mexican people.

In other words, the factors that contributed to the high popularity of AMLO had been at work from a long time ago, and their empirical manifestation became evident in the last presidential elections of 2018.

In the context of mechanisms of impoverishment, exploitation, corruption and extortion of people, which can be called extractive, citizens reacted according to what they thought was the best course of action to counteract oppressive practices.

This context encouraged many Mexican people to interpret positively AMLO's populist discourse and policy proposals, and share his values and principles of social policy. Many Mexican people needed, searched and expected a leader who would give them hope, someone who would offer himself or herself to solve their most profound problems.

For all these reasons, interpretive process tracing was considered suited to unlock the complex causal mechanism of the high popularity of AMLO.

This paper argues that the causal mechanism can be described as an (x) INUS (insufficient but necessary part of an unnecessary but sufficient condition) condition that causes the rise of a populist regime in Mexico (y). As a complex causal mechanism, the (x) variable (INUS condition) can be expanded to any factor that contributes to the positive interpretation of AMLO's discourse by Mexican people (y).

For this reason, the kind of process tracing that will be used in this paper is called 'explaining outcome', because it is focused on explaining the electoral triumph of AMLO and the causal process of its high popularity.

Although both phenomena are closely linked, the causal process of AMLO's current high popularity will be distinguished from the causal process of its electoral triumph. The high popularity of AMLO implies the design and implementation of social policies aimed at building massive clientelistic networks, which increase popular support for his regime. In this sense, Social Network Analysis (SNA) becomes indispensable to understand how these networks function to support AMLO's regime.

This causal mechanism also takes into account the performance of his public policies: The delivery on his promises, the state of the economic, of public security, of the quality of public education, etc… Public assessment of AMLO's government is filtered by the news media, by public debate. This causal mechanism includes non-systematic parts, it is context dependent and oriented.

For the main purpose of the present research, the specific causal mechanism of the electoral triumph and high popularity of AMLO could be expressed in the following formula: $A * B * C * D * E * F * G = H$:

Where A means a very negative social, economic and political context in Mexico; B implies the weariness and discredit of PRI and PAN as ruling parties; C signifies the frame of a 'populist' discourse and policy proposals by AMLO that address this adverse context and discredit the PRI and the PAN even more as ruling parties; D entails the support of a powerful network of media owners, high-profile journalists, businessmen and bankers who contributed to the ample diffusion of these 'populist' discourse and policy proposals; E means the poor understanding of ordinary Mexican people of the causes of their economic, social and political reality; F signifies the moral disposition of Mexican people to accept AMLO's discourse and proposals; **G is the positive 'sense -making' or interpretation of AMLO's 'populist' discourse and policy proposals by the people;** and H (the outcome variable) means the overwhelming popularity of AMLO.

What is worth highlighting in this formula is the association between the type and intensity of news media coverage of presidential nominees with the respective

outcome of the presidential elections of 2018, which still demonstrates the great impact of broadcast and print media in Mexican politics.

Certainly, the explanation of the electoral triumph of AMLO in 2018 is complex, and could involve more factors that those that are considered in this formula. However, the central argument of the present paper is that, based on the behaviour of the news media during the federal electoral process of 2018, these media have become again in a formidable obstacle for the complete transition of this country to democracy, and the knowledge of this reality is crucial for any political scientist who intends to understand current Mexican politics profoundly.

The socio economic and political context constituted a fertile ground for the popularity of the 'populist' discourse and demagoguery practices of AMLO, and reinforced the 'interpretation' that PRI and PAN constituted '*La Mafia del Poder*' and worked for the interests of the international financial system.

Thus, not surprisingly, the presidential campaign of AMLO in 2018 dealt with very sensitive issues of poor people in Mexico, which, in the end, made him be extremely popular and win the presidential elections. Indeed, rampant corruption, extensive social and economic inequalities and the serious and unsolved safety problems of the country, annoyed Mexican people so much that neither the PRI nor the PAN could convince the electorate of their adequacy to enjoy a second chance to solve these touchy issues.

On the other hand, it was true that PRI and PAN had enforced 'neo liberal' policies that impoverished people severely, that the international financial system had pressured the Mexican government to carry out the 'structural adjustment' that impeded the social care of people, and that extractive institutions, such as corruption and public debt, persisted, despite of leading Mexico to recurrent economic and social crises.

On the other hand, this paper argues through interpretive process tracing, the strategy that the owners of the news media followed to support AMLO and impact the electoral outcome of the presidential elections in 2018; which, hypothetically, could be summarized in the following terms: *Little and negative coverage of the*

*policy proposals of Ricardo Anaya and over exposition of his corruption scandals*, and in the cases of Andrés Manuel López Obrador and José Antonio Meade Kulibreña, the strategy could have been quite the opposite: *Large and positive coverage of their policy proposals and concealment of their corruption scandals*.

If we compared the news coverage of AMLO with the respective coverage of *Ricardo Anaya* (the other serious challenger to the PRI regime), in the print and broadcast news media, we would observe a clear preference for AMLO.

This could have been a subtle strategy hardly noticed by common people, but quite effective to position Andrés Manuel López Obrador as the indisputable winner of this electoral contest.


## CONCLUSIONS


The argument of this paper is that the lack of competent knowledge and profound understanding, by common people, of Mexico's economic, social, political, cultural and structural problems, combined with the broad diffusion of a 'populist' discourse that share (partial) truths about this reality, which is aimed at strategically influencing their electoral and political behaviour, quite convenient to AMLO, is the main reason why so many Mexican people support him.

Furthermore, this paper argues that AMLO is building political support for his *populist* regime through his social communication strategies, which would entail the control of news (broadcast and press) media and social (Twitter, Facebook, YouTube, etc…) media, to reduce opportunities of insightful political debate and, subsequently, the emergence of serious political challengers.

This paper points out that the missing constitutional amendment in Mexico consists in the reform of the constitutional framework of the news media so that it may be conducive to a democratic regime. In other words, Mexico urgently needs a constitutional reform of the news media, which could effectively enhance the

democratic character of the public opinion process and prevent its manipulation to make a candidate win elections unfairly.

On the other hand, due to grave shortcomings in their formal education and literacy, many Mexican people are more vulnerable to political manipulation and ideology, to uphold a particular perspective on public issues.

On the other hand, the stream news media reinforces the 'populist' interpretation of AMLO's policies and discourse to preserve his popularity. In this way, the control of the news media and of the 'populist' interpretation of policies is indispensable for AMLO to remain in power.

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# Appendices

This research is committed to *data transparency, analytic transparency and production transparency,* so that its findings and conclusions may be easily replicated. Moreover, the present paper utilises *data archiving* to permit scholars to have access to those data that constitute the basis of its evidence – based claims.

In terms of *data transparency,* scholars can have access to the tables designed to organize and analyse the notes that served as basis of the present research, in this *transparency appendix*.

Regarding *production transparency,* scholars can have access to all the newspapers notes studied in this research, as well as to their identification data: a) Date of publication, b) title of the note, c) author of the note, d) content of the note and e) coding systems used for data analysis, and f) the keywords or key phrases that facilitated the development of categories and themes.

Finally, the access to these tables enhances *analytic transparency*, since scholars can review the specific data analysis, as well as the intellectual processes performed to develop the argument of the present paper.